16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

'witchdoctors' and as 'reactionary upstarts' and 'anti-tribal', speak of them, indeed, as having undermined the traditional privileges of the priests. But this is not a Nuer way of looking at the matter. They do not think of their leopard-skin priests as being privileged persons. Also, I have never heard a Nuer contrast priest with prophet or suggest that there could be rivalry between them as such. Moreover, some of the best-known prophets were, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel of the Old Testament, both priests and prophets.

Owing to the action taken against them by the Government I had no opportunity to get to know any Nuer prophets well enough to reach an understanding of the *forma mentis* of a prophet.[1] According to Nuer tales about them their behaviour was most abnormal. The first prophet, or at any rate the first to achieve fame, was Ngundeng son of Bung, of the Lou tribe, a prophet of the spirit *deng*, who died in 1906. He acquired his powers by prolonged fasts. It is said that he lived for weeks by himself in the bush, eating animal and human excrement, that he used to sit on a cattle-peg in his kraal and let it penetrate his anus, that he used to wander about the bush for days mumbling to himself or sit in his cattle byre doing the same, and that when in such a mood he would refuse all food except ashes, which he had cooked for him. Mr. Coriat says that he was in the habit of falling into trances on the top of the roof of his cattle byre.[2] After he had established himself as a prophet he seems to have given up his solitary wanderings, though he still used to shut himself up in his hut from time to time to undergo long fasts. Nuer say that when the spirit *deng* seized him he could climb into the air without support and could also run up and down from the ground to the top of his byre. His son Gwek, described by Mr. Coriat as of squat body, misshapen arms and legs, and a short toad-like head, also had a reputation for daemonic exhibitions. Mr. Coriat records that he would spend, and spent during Mr. Coriat's visit to his home, all day shouting from the top of what has been described as a pyramid, a remarkable feat both of agility, for the pyramid was most difficult of ascent, and of endurance.[3] Perhaps we would be right in seeing in the habit of mounting to tops of byre and pyramid a symbolic

[1] When I began my studies Gwek, the leading prophet, had already been shot; Dwal, the next most prominent, was in prison; so also was the well-known prophet Car (I declined the administration's offer that I might visit them in prison); and the influential prophet Buom was banished in the course of them.

[2] Op. cit., p. 224.

[3] Ibid., pp. 226–9.

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

792 expression of the prophet's relation to Spirit, the spirit in him lifting him up, as it were, to its own realm.

792 778 The construction of this so-called pyramid (*bie*), a conspicuous landmark in Lou tribal territory, was begun by Ngundeng and completed by Gwek. It was a huge mound of earth and debris some fifty to sixty feet high with a base diameter of about a hundred feet. It was surmounted by elephant tusks and a spear decorated with an ostrich egg and feathers and encircled at the base with dozens of elephant tusks, numbers of which were also buried in the mound.[1] The purpose of the mound seems to have been to honour *deng* and increase the prestige of his prophet, though it may have expressed also the feeling of the above quality of Spirit. It became a cult centre, people from the whole of eastern Nuerland, and even from the west of the Nile, bringing cattle there for sacrifice; and Ngundeng and Gwek kept in a kraal near by a herd of cattle with black and white markings (*rial*) dedicated to *bungdit*, the mother of *deng*, with whom these markings are [177] associated. All this is more in accordance with Dinka than Nuer thought and custom, and there is some reason to suppose that the idea of the mound was, like the *deng* conception itself, borrowed from the Dinka. There is said to be a similar, though smaller, mound at Thoc, in eastern Gaajak country, built by a prophet called Deng, son of Dul. Ngundeng's mound was blown up with high explosive by the British administration during a punitive expedition in 1928 against his son's followers. However, much of it still remains, and Dr. Lienhardt tells me that it is said at the present time that sometimes at night a strange light is seen shining from it; and when a recent eclipse of the sun occurred people said that Ngundeng was returning. Another prophet, Deng Leaka, a 792 prophet of the spirit diu, a Dinka of the Gaawar tribe, also ● 785 acquired his spirit by fasting and solitude. He left his home and wandered in the bush where for many days he sat under a tree without eating. When found he was engaged in collecting hundreds of shells of the giant land snail and arranging them in rows. This abnormal side to the prophets is to be seen in their unkempt hair and their beards, both of which are objectionable to ordinary

[1] Captain H. H. Wilson in *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, edited by Count Gleichen, 1905, vol. i, p. 140; information from Major C. H. Stigand, *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1918, p. 210; H. C. Jackson, op. cit., p. 158; P. Coriat, op. cit., p. 224.

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

792 Nuer. The photograph of a prophet in Plate XV was taken by
785 Major-General Sir Charles Gwynn early in the present century. We see from it how different is the appearance as well as the representation of a prophet from that of a priest!

792 The ascetic and abnormal element in the prophetic personality would seem to have been mixed up with personal ambition, a striving after renown, power, and riches, a combination which made the prophets outstanding figures in Nuerland. Reports by administrative officials constantly denounced them for their greed and ambition and for being 'plausible and unscrupulous' and 'charlatans'. Though these reports do not show great sensitivity in distinguishing between the ideas of holiness and morality, there is an element of truth in what they say. We have noted that it was not just by chance that a man acquired an air-spirit. There is nothing an ordinary Nuer desires less than to be in contact with Spirit. He seeks by sacrifice to rid himself of it or to keep it at a distance, for it is dangerous to him. But a prophet sought inspiration, entry of Spirit into himself and its filling him; and in seeking it he could not but have been aware of the influence it would bring him. Gwek seems to have been what we should call avaricious, though I never heard Nuer say so, and the only prophet of distinction I met, Buom of Dok country, whose spirit was *teny*, was, I would say, a man of cunning whom Nuer themselves regarded as selfish and greedy to acquire large herds. The hostility I sensed among his neighbours may have been due in his case to the support given him by the Government, which had appointed him a 'chief', but I think it is true to say in general that though Nuer feared their leading prophets, their fear, shown in the great outward deference, and in the case of women one might say veneration, they paid them, was tinged with resentment and hostility. They were glad to have people with such powers among them, but it always goes against the grain with Nuer to have to put themselves in an inferior position towards anyone; and in the main we may agree with Capt. V. H. Fergusson when he wrote: 'None of my Nuer [the western Nuer] will tolerate injustice in his everyday life even from a witchdoctor [prophet].'[1] Their attitude to their prophets displayed the same ambivalence that they showed towards the spirits of the air themselves and indeed to Spirit in any form. They wanted it and at the same time did not want it.

[1] *Sudan Notes and Records* 1923, p. 107.